

Tactics

FLYING SOLO

Perfect the art of fishing alone from a flats boat, and become your own best guide.

THE CHALLENGES THAT AN angler faces when stalking shallow-water game fish alone from a flats boat are huge. But, for whatever reason, there are times we all fish by ourselves. It's harder, but it can be done. And honestly, some of us like to go fishing alone, at least some of the time.

When solo stalking redbfish, bonefish, tarpon, and to a lesser degree, even striped bass on the flats, no angler is ever as effective as when working with a guide or a competent partner. But, with the right extra equipment and a few tricks, he can catch fish.

First and foremost, the lone fly fisher needs to be both guide and client. Think about what the guide does and what you do when working a flat. The guide moves the boat with stealth through productive water looking for fish. When they're spotted, he slides into position and holds the boat within range, with the breeze

somewhere on the left side of a right-handed caster. The angler controls his fly line, makes false casts, and shoots the fly toward the fish. The fly fools the fish and the fight is on. The guide then secures the boat with the pole or anchor to help land the fish.

Essentially there are three parts to this scenario: sneaking up on the fish, stopping the boat, and making the cast. All three parts require skill. Even with a good partner, we don't get it right all the time. Doing both jobs alone is doubly hard.

The Essentials

There are certain accessories that will make the task easier. They include a bow-mounted trolling motor, a spear-type anchor, a poling clip mounted to the poling platform, a pole tie-off cord with a quick-setting clip for staking out, and rod holders.

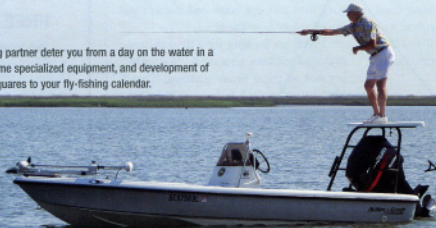
When selecting a trolling motor, go

with a bow-mounted, tiller-drive motor in a durable saltwater model. Over the years, I've had all types of trolling motors: foot-controlled, remote controlled from your belt, remote controlled on the floor. Bass fishermen need foot controls and striper guides can use remotes to their advantage, but for the solo flats angler, the best choice is a tiller control because they are the most dependable and fastest reacting. Forget the trim tab or engine-mount models for the southern flats. They have uses, but moving the boat from the stern is more quietly done with a pole.

The other item on the bow is a spear anchor. Fairly new on the market, this simple stainless-steel rod deploys quickly and quietly, holds fairly securely, and picks up with ease. Once fish are spotted, everything must happen very fast if we expect to catch fish, and a spear anchor is fastest.

At the stern, on the platform, every-

Don't let the lack of an angling partner deter you from a day on the water in a flats boat. A little planning, some specialized equipment, and development of a solo style will add a lot of squares to your fly-fishing calendar.



JOHN AND JOHN GRIBB



The primary challenge of solo fishing from the platform of a flats boat is the need to play both guide and angler. In this setup, the author poles atop his skiff with his rod mounted on the platform frame in a vertical holder (1). With fish sighted (2), it's time to stow the pole in one of two ways. Clipping the pole into a platform-mounted holder with the pole dragging behind (3) allows the boat to continue slowly drifting on a straight course. For staking out, the author uses a stainless-steel quick clip (4), which hangs in the elbow of the pole holder but can be quickly fastened to a staked pole for fixing the boat in one spot.

one has a tie-off line for staking out. Adding a stainless-steel, spring-loaded clip that operates with one hand allows faster tying off.

A pole clip mounted on the platform lets the angler quickly secure the pole once fish are spotted. Pole clips are not designed for staking out or holding the boat in place. They merely secure the pole and drag it behind the boat. There

are also belt-mounted models that work well for spin fisherman, but I recommend the platform-mounted unit when fly fishing. Fly casting requires both hands and more body movement, and the belt model is restricting.

The last accessory at the back of the boat is a rod holder. I use inexpensive plastic models attached to each side of the poling platform uprights. Most of the



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time I use the right-side holder, but I installed one on either side because they are very affordable.

While some people use stripping baskets, I don't. They work well when fishing with a partner. However, when solo, I find myself moving all around the boat, and a basket can impede your mobility.

Setting Up the Shot

Finding the fish and stopping the boat are so interrelated that they must be considered together. When working a flat, the wind or tide is either generally with you, against you, or pretty calm. Working up-tide or upwind, or when covering a lot of water, such as running a shoreline, cruise slowly from the bow with the trolling motor. Once you spot fish, either cut the power and drift gently backward, or throw the spear anchor to stop the boat, and then make casts from the bow. Searching upwind while on the platform is a bit harder work, but the visibility is better. Moving upwind, you often need to get down from the platform and cast from the front, since that will offer the closest shot, unless you can circle around the fish and face them from the stern.

When working downwind, poling from



Left: For fishing into a wind, it's hard to beat a tiller-drive trolling motor and a spear anchor. The bow-mounted motor is more nimble than a stern unit, and the spear anchor slips silently and firmly into soft bottom. **Right:** Line management is seldom a problem from the bow, but it can be troublesome from the platform. The author finds it most effective to hold running line in three progressively smaller coils: the first two for false casting, and the third, larger coil for shooting the final cast.

the platform offers a quieter approach and an elevated view. After spotting fish, sink the pole and tie off to stop the boat. You can jump down and go to the bow if the fish stay around and you need another 18 feet of cast to reach them.

If the wind is slight and you can pole into position for a good drift, the ideal way to approach fish is by sliding the pole into the pole clip and continuing a slow drift toward them. The dragging pole tends to keep the boat straight.

Casting and Catching

Once the guiding part of the job is done, it's time to catch the fish. When working upwind, it's best to cast quickly before you drift back out of range. From the bow, you should already be holding the rod in one hand while working the trolling motor with the other. From the platform, you'll need to quickly drop the pole into the clip and pick up the rod from the holder. In either case, with an into-the-wind approach, line management should not be a problem. When on the bow, extra line will fall onto the boat deck behind you. While fishing from the stern, excess line will trail off the rear of the platform into the water.



When working with the wind from the tower, line control can be a problem. If the line drops onto the rear deck, that's great. But, if it begins to hang up in the console or in the motor well, that is where controlling the line by holding loops comes in handy.

This technique allows you to work with 50 or so feet of line and keep it from tangling with everything in sight. Good casters can easily throw 70 to 80 feet from the platform, but keeping that much line organized is tough. By the time you stop the boat or stow the pole and pick up the rod, 50 feet is about all you'll need.

Holding three loops—two smaller ones to false cast and a long one to shoot—will keep the wind from tangling your line. After a cast, start by making three long strips (three to four feet each) and cradle that loop between the base of your thumb and your palm. Make two more strips and hold that loop a little farther out toward your index finger. I catch the third loop between my thumb and middle finger.

You now have three loops: one about 9 to 12 feet long and two about six to eight feet long, and about 30 feet of line outside the rod tip. Pick up the line, false cast the first loop, then false cast the second, and shoot the third. A 50-foot-plus cast is what you get, and the line is fully controlled.

Another technique when the wind is from behind and you spot fish at a distance is to jump down from the tower and sink the spear anchor from the bow. The boat will spin around in the wind. Re-climb the tower and make very long casts with the aid of the following wind.

When the conditions are perfect—no wind and flat water—I love to slow-pole and dead drift over a productive flat, dropping the pole onto the clip and casting from the platform. We all can catch fish solo under those conditions. I just wish they occurred more often. ■

Capt. John Grubb is a former northeastern striper guide who now pursues redfish on the flats around his adopted home in Charleston, South Carolina.



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